Enlisted Aircrew:

On the hoist, a rescue swimmer is pulled back aboard a CH-46D Sea Knight during training at the NAS Norfolk.

Tough Enough To Do The Job

Story and Photos by JOCS Kirby Harrison

Enlisted aircrew are a tough lot. They are part of a tradition of *tough* that has been passed down since the earliest days of U.S. Naval Aviation — days long before they were known as "aircrew." Back then, they were called observers, often flying in the open rear cockpit of a biplane.

Marine Corps Gunnery Sergeant Robert Guy Robinson was an observer, and one of those early enlisted aircrewmen. On October 14, 1918, he and Marine pilot Lieutenant Ralph Talbot took their WW I DeHavilland DH-4 aloft to do battle over the fields of Belgium. Separated from their formation by engine problems, they were jumped by 12 German planes. In the ensuing melee, Robinson shot down one of the attackers. Moments later, he was hit by enemy fire and his elbow shattered. His normally reliable Lewis gun jammed. While Talbot desperately maneuvered, Robinson cleared the gun with one hand and continued to fight. Again the young Marine was hit, this time in the stomach. And again, through the thigh. Robinson collapsed over his gun.

Talbot shot down another enemy plane and dived to escape. Dodging ground fire, he crossed German lines at 50 feet and landed at a hospital where Robinson was treated for his wounds and survived. For their actions, Robinson and Talbot became the first Marine pilot and enlisted aircrewman to win the Medal of Honor.

As U.S. Naval Aviation grew, the role of enlisted aircrew kept pace. In 1919, eight years before Lindbergh's historic solo transatlantic flight, a U.S. Navy NC-4 flying boat made the first crossing. The crew included Chief Machinist's Mate Eugene "Smokey" Rhoads. Reputed to be one of the best "engine men" in the Navy, Rhoads is given much credit for the success of the NC-4. On at least one leg of the trip, Rhoads actually climbed out of his open cockpit in mid-flight to make adjustments and repairs to keep the four big engines running.

Perhaps of even hardier stock was Chief Mechanician E. H. Howard, the man Rhoads replaced on the flight. During routine maintenance the day before the NC-4 left Rockaway Beach, N.Y., on the first leg, Howard had inadvertently reached out and lost a hand in one of the whirling propellers. Dazed, he walked to the nearby dispensary and returned a few hours later with a hastily bandaged stump and implored Commander John Henry Towers to allow him to continue. Towers, the flight commander, reluctantly denied the request and Howard was taken to a hospital.

By the start of WW II, enlisted aircrew were recognized as an indispensable part

of Naval Aviation. They flew as observers, gunners, corpsmen, mechanics and radiomen, in everything from PBY *Catalinas* to TBF/TBM *Avenger* torpedo-bombers. In the early *Avengers,* aircrewmen were gunners, one in a ball turret behind the pilot and the other at a "stinger" position in the belly looking aft. The introduction of the *Avenger* crews into battle was at Midway, and it was a rude overture. Of the six TBFs that went into the fray, only one came back. It returned with only the trim tab for longitudinal control, one wheel, and the torpedo bay doors were hanging open. One gunner was dead and the other wounded.

As PBYs found their way through the night with the newly discovered magic of radar to bomb Japanese shipping, the aircrews sprayed the enemy with machine gun fire from nose and waist positions. And when Navy and Marine Corps pilots and aircrew went down, enlisted aircrew were aboard the flying boats that pulled them from the sea. There is more than one documented incident of crewmen aboard a flying boat leaping into the ocean to pull an exhausted and wounded Naval Aviator to safety.

Retired Chief Aviation Ordnance Technician Warrant Officer Jim Correll was an enlisted aircrewman with VP-63's *Mad Cats,* a PBY squadron officially credited with sinking three German submarines and shooting down two JU-88 fighter planes.

"I was at North Island when WW II started," he recalls. "A leading chief came up to me and asked if I could fire a machine gun. I spent the next 23 years in Naval Aviation."

On Christmas Eve 1943, Correll was flying from England to North Africa. At about 0300, in a steady rainfall, Correll's plane encountered flack. "We had found the German fleet [actually six destroyers]. We radioed the position and stayed around until the information was confirmed. The British caught [the German fleet]. It turned out to be the biggest sea battle of the Atlantic."

It was during WW II that enlisted aircrewmen won their wings, although some in earlier years had worn the Naval Observer wings. In the spring of 1943, the Navy authorized the wearing of "Air Crew Insignia" by individuals, "having served, subsequent to December 7, 1941, for a total period of three months as a regularly assigned member of the Air Crew of a combatant aircraft." The insignia consisted of a set of steel wings. Between them was a gold rondel and raised anchor. A scroll above held a star for each campaign, and on a scroll below were the words "Air Crew." Those who received their wings prior to 1957 are still authorized to wear the WW II-style insignia. Those who received their wings later switched to the new gold wings presently authorized.

In Korea, enlisted aircrew found a new job. They had already begun to appear in helicopters. Rotary-wing aviation was coming into its own and, more often than not, enlisted aircrewmen were aboard these revolutionary craft mostly in the job of search and rescue.

After Korea, the value of the enlisted aircrewman grew in proportion to demands for greater skills and responsibility. They were loadmasters on larger cargo and passenger aircraft like the R6D *Liftmaster.* With the advent of high-speed tactical jet aircraft and air-to-air missiles, the job of the gunner became obsolete. But advancing technology opened up new areas. Patrol and antisubmarine aviation expanded, and enlisted aircrewmen became adept in the operation of more and more technically sophisticated detection gear on planes like the P2V *Neptune* and HSS (SH-34) *Seabat* helicopter. Aboard aircraft like the P2V and P5M *Marlin,* they assumed the responsibility of flight engineers,

Expansion on enlisted aircrew training was minimal following WW II, despite an expanding role throughout Naval Aviation. Dozens of training facilities operated in the U.S. and even overseas. However, there was little continuity and the requirements varied greatly. As aircraft and systems grew more complex, it became obvious that central control and standardization of curriculum was needed.

By the late 1950s. the number of training facilities had been cut and a common curriculum instituted. As U.S. involvement in South Vietnam increased, so did the need for the skills of professional aircrews. In Southeast Asia, they were flying in everything from P-3 patrol missions off the coast of Vietnam to UH-I helicopter combat with squadrons like HAL-3.

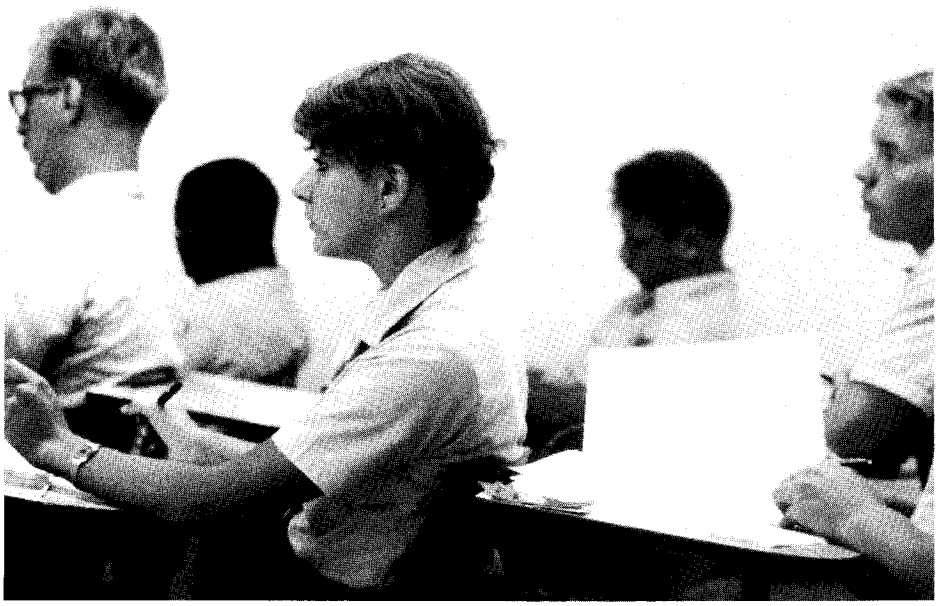
Off the coast of Vietnam, HC-7's *Big Mothers* flew combat search and rescue missions from forward-deployed spots on the decks of destroyers. In armored and armed HH-3 *Sea Kings,* they met each strike mission as the aircraft returned to the carriers, ready to pick up survivors whose damaged planes couldn't make it. On frequent occasions, they went "in-country" to make rescues of downed U.S. pilots. From 1967 to 1973, the squadron is credited with saving more than 120 U.S. pilots and aircrewmen, more than half of them under combat conditions.

The Vietnam war provided impetus to eliminate duplication of effort and improve training. It was the same with enlisted aircrew. BY 1979, the aircrew schools had been pared down to three, at the Norfolk, North Island and Pensacola naval air stations. A flight physiology program had been added, along with ejection seat simulators and a much more mentally and physically demanding syllabus overall. Four Years later, NAS Pensacola became home for all initial enlisted aircrew training, as well as specialized programs such as rescue swimmer and deep water environment survival training. The facilities at NAS North Island and NAS Norfolk became sites for the required four-year refresher training (refresher training is also available at NASs Jacksonville and Pensacola).

At the Naval Aircrew Candidate School, Pensacola, Fla., the mandate is to provide the Navy and Marine Corps candidates from operational squadrons and air stations with the basic survival training and physical conditioning needed to enhance their overall performance and probability of survival.

If it sounds simple, *listen* more closely. The physical training emphasizes swimming. The preliminary, to ensure that candidates can swim, includes a one-mile swim wearing a flight suit. From there it goes to treading water and drown-proofing techniques. To make it realistic, candidates wear full flight gear, including helmets, flight suits, life preserver units, G-suits, boots and even gloves.

Then come the "dunkers." This is even tougher. In addition to the single-place water-landing simulator, there is a multi-place helicopter dunker. From the outside, it looks like an overgrown beer can with windows cut into it. Inside, it resembles a multi-place helicopter. The candidates normally go through four immersions. The first two are relatively easy. On the third and fourth, they must wear opaque goggles to simulate a night crash landing. With rescue swimmers and corpsmen standing by, the process is relatively safe. But for those involved, when the dunker hits the water with a great splash, rolls over in complete darkness and begins to sink all too quickly, fear and panic are separated from discipline and training by a very thin



Classroom studies play a major role in enlisted aircrew training. Approximately 40 women graduate each year.

veneer.

The aircrew candidate is usually wet. If it isn't from salt water in Pensacola Bay or fresh water in a pool, it is sweat from the 1.5-mile run or the 600-yard obstacle course. The run begins easily enough with a shaded trail and short downhill. From there, it hits a series of ankle-deep sand traps, winds through the air station, up and down hills, and ends at the point where it began. Men must complete the course in 11:39 to qualify, women in 14 minutes. The obstacle course is an athlete's nightmare of tires, walls, four-foot hurdles, balance beams, monkey bars and a maze. If that isn't enough for a sweat, there are three and five-mile conditioning runs and aerobics classes that make Jack LaLanne look like a whimp. There are boxing matches in which the candidates wear just enough protection to prevent injury, and just little enough that they feel every jolt of the opponent's glove. In a controlled helicopter crash, the crew might very well encounter the same kind of pounding. Boxing, the instructors maintain, teaches the confidence and presence of mind necessary to survive in such a situation.

To keep the training interesting, there are frequent "motivational" exercise sessions. Candidates caught daydreaming may find themselves paying a price in push-ups. Worse, they may find the entire class paying that price.

Sandwiched between the swimming and the sweat are classroom courses. Detailed lectures cover safety equipment and procedures, aircraft platform familiarization, American Red Cross first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

The five weeks close with a course in land survival. Candidates learn to eat, and almost enjoy, grubs, snakes and roots that Euell Gibbons would have tossed out. They learn how to find water and how to make it safe to drink. They learn to construct shelters and navigate through rough country. And, as a graduation present of sorts, they are then dropped off in small groups in remote areas of the Florida panhandle to practice what the instructors preach. We're not talking Miami Beach, here. The Florida panhandle is very rough, very desolate country, with little more than berries, roots and armadillos to keep body and soul together if you're living off the land. In the summer, the temperature may reach 100 degrees, and in the winter it gets a lot colder than anyone north of the Mason-Dixon Line could imagine. Maybe not three feet of snow and ice, but cold enough to make aircrew candidates with little more than a handful of matches and a compass very miserable indeed.

The idea, say instructors, is to teach them that they can survive and, as a team, they can do even better. It obviously works. Last year, the drop-on-request rate of loss in the school was less than five percent.

The end of the five-week school is a graduation ceremony that does not include the passing out of the gold aircrew wings. The graduates are still weeks, even months away.

Some, from the top 10 percent of the class, are invited to stay for an additional four weeks of rescue swimmer training to qualify in search and rescue.

Rescue swimmer school is made up of the top graduates from basic aircrew school and from volunteer enlisted aircrew already in the fleet. If the four weeks are demanding, there is extra incentive. Every candidate learns prior to accepting orders to the school that if he or she is dropped for any reason, the student forfeits the entire aircrew program.

On graduation, they are assigned to helicopter squadrons or naval air stations, where they will fly as the "wet aircrewmen" on search and rescue missions.

Some graduates of basic aircrew school are immediately sent to squadrons or air stations to begin training in the specific type of aircraft to which they are assigned. This may range from the CH-53E *Super Stallion* heavy-lift helicopter to the C-2 *Greyhound* long-range, logistics cargo/passsenger plane. Other graduates go on to schools, such as flight engineer training, aerial photography and antisubmarine warfare, before assignment to a unit.

Upon arrival at their permanent duty station, the aircrew candidates are still faced with more work before receiving their wings. They must train for a specific position on a specific aircraft, anywhere from two to 11 months, and then finish a minimum of 50 hours of flight time in the aircraft, or complete a CNO-approved aircrew training syllabus. The final hurdles are the open and closed-book NATOPS exams and a final checkride in the aircraft.

Most of the Navy's enlisted aircrew candidates are from aviation ratings; however, the corpsmen rating is one exception. Some of these personnel are qualified aircrew, working as in-flight specialists aboard search and rescue helos or medical evacuation transport aircraft.

Of the 10,000 enlisted aircrewmen at nearly 250 squadrons and aviation units, there are 185 aircrew-qualified corpsmen.

According to one former aircrewman, those who win their wings and leather flight jackets quickly discover that it isn't about gold insignia and leather jackets. "Those are nice," he said, "but what aircrew is really about is pride and tradition."

It's about people who are tough enough to do a tough job. ■